

Martin Luther King Could Share Bertrand Russell's Pitiable Fate

BY MAX FREEDMAN

Unless he watches himself very carefully, the Rev. Martin Luther King is in danger of becoming the Bertrand Russell of the United States. Like Lord Russell, he is in danger of putting off greatness and becoming a bore, an intruder where he has no business, and a busybody causing great mischief. Dr. King has created these risks for himself by his decision to use the prestige won in his campaign for civil rights for the purposes of conciliation in Vietnam.

If this decision concerned only Dr. King personally, it would be a small matter, whether it was right or wrong. But it may cause serious trouble for the whole civil rights movement.

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The analogy with Lord Bertrand Russell is pertinent and instructive.

Like Dr. King, Bertrand Russell is a pacifist. He went to jail in the First World War in protest against England's part in that struggle. It took the brutal challenge of Hitler and Mussolini to teach him the limitations of pacifism. Then with the coming of the nuclear age he became the foremost and most irresponsible advocate of nuclear disarmament in Britain. He dwindled into a pitiable spectacle, a philosopher of distinction babbling erratic nonsense as a senile and garrulous old man.

Dr. King faces three dangers as a self-appointed apostle of peace.

In the first place, he may misrepresent the civil rights movement by his efforts to end the struggle in Vietnam. The people who support that movement have not agreed on common views on foreign policy. Who gave Dr. King a mandate to speak for them

on Vietnam? He is using his personal prestige for a new cause in which he has no general authority to pose as a national leader. On these grave issues of peace and war he speaks only for the small cluster of his immediate followers and for those who share his pacifist views.

Secondly, Dr. King may find his prestige abused by the Communists to the detriment of American interests. The Communists are always looking for a famous name with which to confuse and divide American opinion. Russia has frequently used Bertrand Russell in that way to advance its disarmament aims. North Vietnam and China may use Dr. King in a similar way to further their own plans and ambitions.

In short, the worst danger may come if Dr. King's letters are answered by the Communist rulers in Hanoi and Peking. Then the rest of us will have to be on vigilant watch to see

had the conscience of America overwhelmingly on its side in its search for Negro rights. Does Dr. King think the Communists will feel a similar surge of conscience as he pleads the cause of peace? Unless he is far wiser in foreign affairs than any of us have reason to expect, Dr. King may find that it is not pacifism but communism that has carried the day.

Dr. King, as a private citizen, is escaping the restraints of the Logan Act by the technical plea that he is not entering into actual negotiations with foreign governments. He is simply offering his good offices as a distinguished citizen to hasten that movement to the conference table which is one of the announced aims of American policy. This is delicate and doubtful ground. Dr. King had better watch his step lest he break the rule that only the President, or those speaking for the President, can conduct relations with foreign powers.

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Since he won the Nobel Peace Prize, something tragic and unexpected has happened to Dr. King. He has become pompous and dull. Not so long ago he was a supreme orator. Now he can scarcely utter a simple sentence without intoning it as an exercise in solemn declamation. Is he casting about for a role in Vietnam because the civil rights struggle is no longer adequate to his own estimate of his talents? That is the kind of arrogance which fate soon punishes.

If Dr. King is looking for some real challenges, he does not have to look very far; he does not have to thrust himself into Vietnam.



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that Dr. King does not become an unwitting and unwilling instrument of Communist propaganda. If he does fall into that trap, he must endure swift and merciless exposure.

Thirdly, Dr. King is bringing the philosophy of pacifism to a test it cannot pass. In this country the non-violent movement has